



# Western States Water

## Addressing Water Needs and Strategies for a Sustainable Future

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Chair - Julie Cunningham; Executive Director - J.D. Strong; Editor - Elysse Ostlund Campbell

### **WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL Fall Meetings, San Pedro, California**

On September 23-26, the State of California hosted WSWC's 208th Meetings in San Pedro, California. The WSWC revised and readopted the following positions: (1) expressing support for implementation of the SECURE Water Act; (2) supporting legislation requiring the federal government to pay state filing fees in state general stream adjudications; and (3) support for critical water data programs. WSWC allowed Position #486 – Regarding Clean Water Act § 404(c) to sunset with the intent to revisit core concepts at a future meeting. The members identified several topics of interest for future discussions and presentations, including: (1) maintaining and enhancing federal data networks; (2) artificial intelligence (AI) and data handling; (3) conjunctive groundwater management; (4) water reuse (including for data centers); and (5) cooperative federalism regarding Good Samaritan hard rock mining pilot projects.

WSWC's new Executive Director, J.D. Strong kicked off the meetings, noting his prior experience as a member of WSWC representing Oklahoma. "Thank you all so much for giving me this opportunity to be Executive Director of an organization that I've held dear for a long time. I think it is an invaluable voice for water in the West.... I have always valued the West and lamented the times when a lot of the politics, decisions, and regulatory regimes implemented out of Washington, D.C., are oftentimes dominated by Eastern states and their views. That's why I have always felt it is important to make sure that Western voices are loud and clear, and at least as present at the table as Eastern state voices. I look forward to the great discussions, and thank you again for the opportunity. It is a real honor to be able to serve you all in this position."

Prior to the meetings, WSWC held its second groundwater workshop, following the first in Lincoln, Nebraska (WSW #2658). States provided broad updates on groundwater challenges, citing persistent water supply stress, legal and regulatory disputes, funding and staffing shortages, and public distrust of

data. Long-term issues included political inertia, cumulative impacts of exempt wells, and regulatory avoidance. States highlighted emerging strategies in response, such as rebalancing state-local authority, improving conjunctive management, expanding voluntary metering, reforming exempt well and export policies, applying AI to data management, and advancing water reuse. Nevada and Oregon also shared recent experiences with cybersecurity threats and response strategies. The States also discussed groundwater management areas facing over appropriation, declining safe yield, or water quality concerns. Members discussed how best to balance state versus local authority, protect vulnerable users while maintaining production, and address gaps in enforcement authority. They noted issues with public skepticism towards data and permitting evasion.

Jeanine Jones presented on managed aquifer recharge (MAR) in California, highlighting the historical, geological, and legal drivers of MAR program development over time. Scott Bradford (USDA) presented an update on the Interagency MAR Workgroup, designed to support States developing MAR by assisting with site selection, performance assessment, and identifying economic and regulatory solutions. The Workshop concluded with an open exchange on MAR status and challenges in each State, including water rights conflicts and accounting methods.

On September 24, members attended a full day field trip focused on groundwater recharge. Participants toured the Leo Vander Lans Advanced Water Treatment Plant, the Orange County Water District Groundwater Replenishment System, and the Santa Ana River and Recharge Facilities.

On September 25, WSWC wrapped up its strategic directions exercise, discussing possible changes to meetings, committees, and resolutions. The Council then held a topical deep dive on water data, stressing the importance of federal networks such as U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) stream gages, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) snow surveys, National Weather Service stations, and the Bureau of Reclamation's Hydromet and Agrimet programs.

Members voiced concern over federal under investment, noting that the value of water data lies in long historical periods of record. Texas pointed to recent severe flooding as evidence of the need for denser data collection (See WSW #2669.) Cuts to the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS), as well as federal Section 106 and floodplain grants, threaten water quality monitoring and essential baseline data for permits and Total Maximum Daily Loads.

States highlighted that they contribute significant funding toward Federal Priority Streamgages (FPS), while USGS's Cooperative Matching Fund appropriation has remained static as inflation has increased, leading to increasingly disparate cost-sharing. Some States noted contributing almost two thirds of the cost of streamgage operations, in some cases performing their own data collection that the federal government then utilizes. Participants emphasized the "power of partnerships" as an efficient use of public resources. The group emphasized the need for a targeted policy resolution to advocate for federal support and the value of sharing state-specific data success stories to influence legislators and federal agencies.

In the Joint Committee Meeting, Cary Talbot, U.S. Army Engineer Research & Development Center, reported on Forecast-Informed Reservoir Operations (FIRO), covering the program's background, mechanisms, and progress. A signing ceremony for the first fully updated FIRO water control manual at Lake Mendocino in California is scheduled for October 22. Since testing began, FIRO has saved water equal to the needs of nearly 200,000 homes, worth about \$100M. He highlighted Army Corp leadership's recent Congressional testimony, emphasizing the agency's focus on fast-tracking FIRO in other states to maximize existing infrastructure (WSW #2679). He noted that the viability of FIRO is driven by forecast skill, which varies greatly by geographic location. Screening of 593 Corps dams found 19% with no apparent prohibitive barriers, 50% with significant barriers, and 33% unsuitable for FIRO.

Cathleen Jones, Senior Research Scientist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), provided an update on the NISAR satellite mission. The U.S. National Atmospheric and Space Administration (NASA) and Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) recently launched the Earth science mission with an advanced synthetic aperture radar system (WSW #2674). Equipped with a 12 meter synthetic aperture radar, NISAR penetrates clouds to image the Earth's surface every 12 days at 20 foot resolution. It processes products within 24 hours and releases them publicly within 48 hours. NISAR supports monitoring of (1) surface deformation such as landslides, fault creep,

earthquakes, and land subsidence; (2) ecosystems and hydrology such as crop monitoring, forest biomass, wetlands mapping, surface water extent, and flooding; and (3) infrastructure risks including slope failure and subsidence.

Staff provided updates on: (1) the success of the virtual Indian Water Rights Symposium held in August (Special Report #2674); (2) the recent federalism advocacy letter in response to federal actions on CWA §401 (WSW #2678); and (3) upcoming rulemaking on Waters of the United States (WOTUS), which may require additional engagement from members (WSW #2664). The first in-person Western Water Cooperative Committee meeting is scheduled for December 3 and 4 in Bismarck, North Dakota.

In the Full Council Meeting, WSWC Chair Julie Cunningham announced the Spring 2026 meeting in Washington, D.C., with a series of virtual meetings in the Summer, and another in-person meeting for the Fall. The Council approved a Resolution of Appreciation for Tony Willardson, recognizing his collaborative efforts alongside various state, federal, tribal representatives and organizations to protect, develop, manage, and utilize western water resources. The resolution concluded by recognizing his extraordinary contributions, expressing sincere appreciation for his knowledge, passion, and advocacy, and extending the Council members' best wishes in his retirement and future endeavors.

Roger Gorke introduced the new WestFAST liaison, Jason Olive. J.D. acknowledged his experience working with Jason, and expressed confidence in his ability to serve as a strong liaison for western states. Jason noted the impact of 30% federal staff turnover on WestFAST membership, and efforts to fill positions. He discussed intentions to update their workplan by January 2026 to align with the outcomes of WSWC's strategic plan. He announced the return of the WestFAST-WSWC webinar series starting October 20 with a presentation from Idaho's Department of Water Resources on how they use Landsat data.

In closing, J.D. said "Thank you all for taking a real hands-on approach—grabbing the bull by the horns, and making sure that we're driving the organization forward through this time of transition, taking it to new heights in Western States Water Council 2.0, as Julie dubbed it."

Julie Cunningham expressed confidence and anticipation for the changes the Council would be making together, including increasing opportunities for collaboration while streamlining formalities. "I would just like to say, I'm excited. I hope we're all excited. I think we've picked a great leader here.... The possibilities are endless, and we certainly want this to be our organization and run it in the direction that we want to."

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**The WESTERN STATES WATER COUNCIL is a government entity of representatives appointed by the Governors of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.**